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ASEC, CO  
SUBJECT: TELLING COLOMBIA'S STORY: FROM FAILING STATE TO STABLE ALLY

SUMMARY

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11. (SBU) The Ambassador challenged the Embassy's Country Team to critique and refine Post's strategic mission during the annual offsite meeting on October 5. The Country Team developed several objectives for the coming year, including: articulating and promoting the USG message on human rights issues in Colombia; making the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) more operational in support of Colombia's National Consolidation Plan (PNC); addressing the ubiquitous need for more police as the country transitions to a post-conflict environment; using programming and other resources to encourage rule of law and good governance practices and to confront pervasive corruption; and improving our reporting and briefing materials to better portray Colombia's successes and failures. End Summary.

COUNTRY CONDITIONS: THUMBNAIL OVERVIEW

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12. (SBU) The Country Team assessed that the possible reelection of President Uribe for a third term in 2010 will dominate all political issues in the coming year. While other qualified candidates have emerged, none is considered to have a realistic chance should Uribe run again. Political and human rights scandals that have plagued the Uribe Administration -- such as the GOC electronic surveillance of the Supreme Court -- would likely continue to haunt a third term.

13. (SBU) The Colombian public is becoming increasingly concerned about economic conditions, particularly unemployment. Colombia's economic growth in 2009 is expected to slow to between 0 and negative 0.5 percent for the year, although the financial sector remains solid. Interest rate cuts and greater emphasis on export diversification, infrastructure investments and competitiveness will be essential to return Colombia's economy to sustained growth in the long term. The strong Colombian peso is negatively affecting Colombian exports while helping to offset high tariffs on U.S. products. President Uribe remains deeply concerned about passing the FTA before the elections in May of 2010.

14. (SBU) Colombia's regional relationships have become strained due to the fallout over the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). Relations with Venezuela are rockier than normal, but there are encouraging signs of a rapprochement with Ecuador.

15. (SBU) The overall security conditions in Colombia continue to improve, though the military's momentum against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has slowed over the past year as the FARC have switched to asymmetrical tactics. Coca cultivation is more dispersed and migrating to more permissive environments such as national parks, indigenous communities and border areas. Emerging criminal groups (BACRIM) present an increasing threat in many parts of the country, causing disturbing spikes in violence as they battle with other illegal groups for control of the lucrative drug trade.

#### OUR FIRST PRIORITY: STRESSING HUMAN RIGHTS

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16. (SBU) Despite progress on human rights in Colombia, serious concerns remain. Over the coming year, Post plans to continue to raise the profile of human rights issues in our strategic communication, reporting, programming, and engagement with senior GOC officials.

17. (SBU) More specifically, the Ambassador instructed the Country Team to develop a human right agenda with the Government of Colombia (GOC), identifying the key areas for improvement and our suggested talking points. The Country Team noted the need to: a) attack impunity by encouraging the GOC to prosecute current and past human rights abuses; b) push for the implementation of the Colombian military's well-defined human rights regimen; and c) counter the GOC's tendency to stigmatize human rights NGOs and human rights defenders. (Note: Septel will expand on these points and propose follow-up actions. End note)

#### CSDI: TRANSITIONING FROM PLAN COLOMBIA

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18. (SBU) We reviewed progress to date under the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), which was conceived during the previous year's offsite as the successor to Plan Colombia. CSDI is the Embassy's inter-agency plan to support the GOC's National Consolidation Plan (PNC) to expand state presence to areas previously controlled by illegal armed groups. We have formed a CSDI executive committee comprised of section and Agency heads from USAID, the Narcotics Affairs Section, the Military Group, and Political in order to facilitate inter-agency coordination. Presently, the Embassy is using existing funding to implement priority projects.

19. (SBU) CSDI is initially focused on the following areas: Meta/Buenaventura (in Central Colombia), Tumaco/Narino (in the South), and Montes de Maria (in the North). Two additional areas, Choco/Uruba and Catatumbo/Bajo Cauca, could be ready for some CSDI programs over the next 12 months, which would generally give the CSDI broad coverage of the impoverished Pacific Coast. The civilian lead of the PNC has yet to take full charge of consolidation efforts, leaving the Ministry of Defense organizationally in front. Other obstacles include the need for a comprehensive security strategy to transition from military to police in consolidated territories; more focus on alternative development, social programs, and judicial reform to complement the ongoing counternarcotics strategy; stronger presence of the justice sector and human rights promotion in CSDI areas; and increased funding commitments from GOC civilian ministries.

#### MEASURING SUCCESS

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110. (SBU) We reviewed lessons learned under Plan Colombia and discussed the need to develop a more holistic and accurate metric with which to measure our progress under CSDI. Rather than focusing solely on hectares of coca/poppy eradicated and on drug seizures, metrics should be expanded to include other indicators such as: hectares converted to licit production, individuals who have switched to legal economic alternatives, and population

segments that have benefited from education initiatives and other social investments. In other words, the metric must capture the whole story of our efforts.

#### RULE OF LAW IS KEY TO SUCCESS

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¶11. (SBU) The Country Team repeatedly emphasized the critical role played by the Colombian National Police (CNP) in consolidation. As the GOC continues to recover national territory from the control of illegal armed groups, the vacuum is often filled by drug traffickers, with violent consequences for the general population. Police presence is crucial for establishing a community presence in newly consolidated areas. Any increase in police forces must take into account security concerns -- especially given the FARC's recent announcement that it considers all PNC projects to be legitimate military targets. However, while the CNP has the leadership capacity and organization to increase its presence throughout Colombia, it lacks the infrastructure, personnel and budget to do so.

¶12. (SBU) Looking broadly, expanded police presence should be accompanied by the rest of the state entities that incorporate the rule of law, namely, the Prosecutor General's Office, Human Rights Ombudsman, and Inspector General. We agreed to integrate these rule of law issues into our CSDI planning process and our overall strategy, resources and budget planning processes.

#### CORRUPTION: A PERVASIVE PROBLEM

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¶13. (SBU) In addition to serious infrastructure deficiencies in roads and ports, Country Team members repeatedly identified corruption as a significant problem in Colombia that limits growth and investment. An October 1 article in respected weekly "Cambio" estimated that Colombia loses as much as \$2 billion to corruption each year, and that corruption in public contracts effectively doubles the annual cost of democratic security. We plan to tackle corruption more directly in the coming year by increasing our engagement with GOC Anti-Corruption Czar Oscar Ortiz; focusing on good governance and rule of law initiatives, including through public-private partnerships; encouraging Colombia to make its procurement processes more transparent (for example by encouraging them to become a signatory to the WTO chapter on government procurement); and shining a light on corruption while at the same time identifying and working with honest GOC officials.

#### ORGANIZING FOR SUCCESS

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¶14. (SBU) We discussed management challenges and opportunities, including the mission platform, space constraints, construction plans, and future staffing needs. We considered our longer-term plans for the new Cartagena branch office. The Country Team also agreed that we should bolster our mentoring program for entry and mid-level officers -- and open these opportunities up to other sections outside of the traditional Foreign Service community.

#### TELLING COLOMBIA'S STORY

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¶15. (SBU) We discussed ways to improve our reporting and the experiences we offer to visitors to Colombia. Many Congressional delegations and senior-level administration visitors have been impressed by Colombia's progress under Plan Colombia. At least one member of Congress remarked that our Country Team briefing materials could do a better -- and more personalized -- job of relating Colombia's transition from nearly failed state to a relatively stable U.S. partner. Still others have commented that Colombia has valuable lessons to share with respect to challenges facing the USG elsewhere, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan. We will incorporate these suggestions into our reporting and briefing materials, and consider other media for visitors such as a DVD with personal vignettes of Colombians whose lives have been improved through USG assistance.

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